

TOUCHSTONES

TRANSCENDENCE

TOOLS, NOT IDOLS

THE NEXT TIME someone asks me why Mormons don't discuss the specifics of temple ceremonies, even amongst themselves, I am going to say this: "To leave each of us free to interpret the temple in our own way; to protect it from correlation." I used to crave more open discussion about temple rituals so that I could figure out their real, fixed meaning once and for all. Now I am almost thankful for the secrecy—the symbols, the archetypes, the influence of Masonry—whatever keeps the endowment from being easily codified by a committee.

Now that I feel free to apply my own reading to the endowment, I find it surprisingly universalist. I am delighted at how Mormonism's highest ordinances are not very Mormon at all in an institutional sense. Mormonism's ultimate worship experience actually points away from itself, to a universalizing faith. Although one must be very Mormon in order to be admitted to the temple, once one is inside, where is Joseph Smith? The Restoration? The cultural politics? The institutional church? It's almost as though we need to embrace the extremes (unbelief or partisan belief) before coming to the temple to discover that denominationalism is a means, not an end. Now that I have stumbled on transcendence, so many of those turns of phrase and

symbols that used to bother or puzzle me, I see as endearing trappings: tools, not idols; convenient media for teaching, but not literal at all. God really does want me to transcend Mormonism, not get hung up on it. And that's one reason I love Mormonism.

JOANNE CASE

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"LOOK!" AND LIVE

Meditation on 3 Nephi 28

WHAT DO YOU want after I'm gone?" Zed swallowed. He had expected the question but still was not ready. No one answered.

The question echoed in the silence. *Which of you, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? If asked for fish, will you give a snake? Ask and you will receive.*

The questioner reached out. Zed tilted his head slightly and raised an eye to see just past the head in front of him to where the questioner's hand rested briefly on another. They spoke quietly. Zed couldn't hear. The questioner touched another and another, as they spoke. Zed strained to listen, watching sincere wishes flicker across faces. The questioner turned, and Zed returned behind the head. Heart racing, he silently rehearsed familiar words. *They are delivered from that awful monster; death. If I die in the dark, it'll be because I don't ask.*

"What do you want after I'm gone?"

Zed heard the question repeated faintly, and soon less faintly. Closing his eyes, he thought he could make out others' words, asking for reunion and rest, and the questioner's response, "You're blessed."

"Zed, what do you want me to do for you when I'm gone?"

He shuddered. *My wish is a sin. I should be content with my allotment. We must die.*

"Look!"

Zed dared not move, but essayed a peek at the ground. The feet of the questioner were near. *If I touch even his clothes! The grace, justice, power, and mercy of deliverance from death.*

"I know your thoughts."

Zed's face burned.

"You want what John, whom I love, asked of me."

Zed started. Carefully, his head was raising. Tentatively, his eyes were meeting the questioner's. *As many as look with trust will live.*

"So you're more blessed, because you'll never die."

Zed was touched, not by the questioner, but by a friend at his side. The questioner continued to speak. Zed was touched again, by another friend. The questioner moved on to others. Zed almost reached out, but he realized he was not alone. They were no longer ashamed of their desire, and they lived.

LINCOLN CANNON

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HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

THEY SAY GHOSTS are the spirits of people who are dealing with loose ends. Urgent unfinished business can make any death untimely and spawn a haunting.

Based on this theory, if my wife died tomorrow, I believe she would feel the need to come back as my driving instructor. She would haunt every car I drive. Even my rentals would come equipped with a ghostly, sarcastic GPS system with an intimate knowledge of all my weaknesses.

"Whyyyyy didn't youuuuu ahhhhpgrade?" she would moan and nag.

"Whaaaat are youuuu doing? Youuuuu should haaave turrnned therrre." (That one is my favorite—"You should have turned there." Gee, thank you for withholding that information until it was "criticism." Two blocks ago, it would have been "advice.")

Another favorite? "Waaaatch wheeeeere yourrrrr'e goooooing!" Of course, even after death, she would say this right after she pointed out something of interest: "Ahhhh,

TOUCHSTONES was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for a wide variety of personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection by email, send it to Touchstones editor Dan Wotherspoon at: DANWOTHERSPOON@ME.COM. If submitting by mail, send it to Sunstone, 343 N. Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103. Submissions should be kept somewhere under 500 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces.

Please submit something right away for these upcoming topics!

Upcoming Topics: { A WINDOW OPENS
PROMISED LAND



looooooook aaaat thaaat pooooony!”

She’s right, though. I do tend to look at everything but the road when I drive. And who can blame me? Have you seen the road lately? I have. I started a “career” as a stand-up comedian in 1998. Most of my gigs were in small towns without airports, so for the next ten years I drove about 75,000 miles each year. Therefore, with the authority of experience, I can say that the road is boring. It’s gray, flat, and of uniform width with several billion, white, dashed lines identical in length and uniformly spaced. Occasionally the road narrows down to two lanes of opposing traffic separated by yellow lines—and that’s where things occasionally get pretty exciting. Still, for the most part, our interstates are unbearably boring compared to everything going on around them.

Take a valley I have often driven through on my way to Denver. A mile wide, air full of hawks, maybe an eagle, and with a long, winding line of half-dead cottonwoods and deep orange willows all sidled up to a river like pigs to a trough. A river with a billion fish and water both turbulent and still, reflecting and refracting light from a naked sun in a sky as blue as Cyndi Lauper’s eye shadow.

Naturally I’m going to think about being down by the river. At its edge. Turning over

rocks, panning for gold, smelling mud, finding a body. Checking my traps and scanning the current for fish. Peering into the brush for deer, elk, bear, cougars, and Indians. Rifle in hand, knife at the ready. Every nerve spent serving my survival.

Instead I’m *driving*. My nerves are shot sitting behind the wheel, mulling over joke premises while looking for punch lines and checking mirrors instead of traps. I am consciously trying to *shut out* the beautiful scenery so I can scan, constantly scan, not down rivers for fish but behind billboards and at on-ramps for cops—uniformed people armed with guns, tasers, pads, and pens. People who scold me, raise my car insurance rates, and sternly wave me past the scenes of horrific accidents, all calm and composed like people working in their yard. The cops are at home on the road.

I’m not at home on the road. I’m between everything I know and everything that matters to me, urgently crawling along at 85 miles an hour in a machine I don’t understand, like a spirit in limbo with unfinished business ahead and behind.

When dark settles in, and my headlights let me see only a few hundred yards into my immediate future, I always get scared. Yet, mercifully, even that fear gets boring, the jitters settle into complacency, and I

calmly begin to take in all the glowing yellow warning signs. Soon they are simply depictions of ways for me to die out here: Hey, look, I could get done in by a leaping trophy buck or crushed by a falling rock! Wow, I might slide off the wet road or slam into a cow—or maybe both at the same time! Or I could simply drift off the road while day dreaming—or *literally* dreaming. Dying alone in your sleep has a whole new meaning now that we’ve entered the age of the automobile.

On the bright side, a high percentage of these various ways in which I might transcend the earthly sphere are not slow and painful. On the dark side, they all occur “out here,” on the road, far from home in the land of unfinished business. If I die out here, a haunting would definitely be in order.

I suppose if I died out on the road, I would probably haunt my own funeral. I would want more than anything to be in a room full of people who knew all my jokes and me. And I would actually love, more than the laughter of strangers, the sound of my wife’s nagging voice delivering her line with perfect timing, under her breath, tinged with irritation and I hope some grief—a bearable amount of grief: “*I told you so.*”

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Dr. Boiuz

DEJA VU?

THE REAL QUESTION facing the Church with regards to homosexuality is whether there is a genetic element to sexual preference. Many of the issues to be dealt with are similar to those I faced as a young man knowing that colored men could not hold the priesthood yet being told by my parents that Negroes were every bit as intelligent and able as whites. They tried to impress on me that “nigger” was an offensive term, something they had learned in Los Angeles when my father was an engineer at Lockheed. But that was a hard lesson for a young man to learn growing up in the U.S. in the 1950s. From friends, I learned all the offensive words together: nigger and queer, coon and fag, darky and fairy. My father had learned to work with and respect Negroes, but he and my mother rarely discussed homosexuals. No one mentioned that my father’s cousin might be queer, a fag, a fairy. No one taught me any restraint in referring to gay men. In fact, for years I nursed a grudge that queers had co-opted a perfectly good word in an attempt to gentrify their image.

The Church finally faced the question of blacks and priesthood head-on in 1978. I was working for the Church’s historical department at the time and well recall the wave of relief and joy that greeted the announcement that all worthy males could now hold the priesthood. We have yet to face the question of gays and marriage in the same way.

I find what we Mormons are now saying and doing with regards to homosexuals to be the same kind of knee-jerk reaction as our former claims about blacks having been fence-sitters during the war in heaven, born with dark skins as a mark of their equivocation and disloyalty. At present we ask gays to transcend their emotions, to resist the desire to act on any feelings of same-sex attraction. Ostensibly, we ask them to act as we ask heterosexuals to act, allowing themselves sexual activity only within the bounds of marriage. But here is the rub: we don’t recognize any form of permissible marriage for gays, so how can they ever enjoy sexual fulfillment?

EVEN while growing up in the 1950s, I was never taught that sexual activity was bad. It was *precious*. We were to reserve it for marriage, for procreation, but it was not evil. As I grew up, more and more General Authorities spoke of it as a sacred bond between couples, not reserved for reproduction only. The Church did not

change its teaching that sex outside of marriage is improper, but I heard statements like this much less often than I used to: “We have seven children and we made love only eight times. The eighth time was a mistake.” The importance of sex to a marriage extends beyond conception, we have learned.

But if we were to take our current position regarding gays to its logical extreme, we would be creating a class of Mormon monks and nuns, welcome in the church, welcome in service to the world, welcome in the mission field but not welcome to express their deepest emotional yearning for permanent connection to one they love. We ask them to remain celibate, forever celibate, and single. Especially for young men, this is a lot to ask in a culture that still regards them as queer.

During the fuss over Proposition 8, Church spokesmen suggested that civil unions are acceptable for gay couples, just not marriages. That stance raises the question of how the Church would respond to a gay couple who had a legal civil union and were sexually active within that union, but not outside it. Would they then be able to participate in Church in full faith and fellowship? Would gay men be able to hold positions of priesthood leadership? Could they affirmatively answer the question: Do you live the law of chastity? Could they serve as proxies in the temple? For any single gay person at present, the answer to those questions is yes as long as they are not sexually active; this is the same test applied to a single straight person. But, unlike the single straight person, single gay persons cannot, at present, hope for any sexual expression that would not effectively estrange them from the Church and the gospel. And this brings us back to a connection with the question of blacks and the priesthood: if there is a genetic component to sexual preference, wouldn’t this represent gospel discrimination based on a characteristic as innate as skin color?

That point raises another hard question for us straight Mormons. If the Church were to recognize some form of civil union for gays, could we transcend our contempt, our hatred, our fear of our gay brothers and sisters?

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THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

THEIR FERVOR TRIGGERS a trip to a different dimension. The members of the Gospel Doctrine class are involved in an energetic discussion of the Abrahamic

covenant. In my cocoon, I’m aware of what’s going on, of how dynamic the exchanges are as various class members share ways that being part of that covenant blesses their lives. I’ve hardly ever seen them so animated. From my in-between space, I watch with detached fascination and begin to ask how long has it been since I’ve even *thought* about Abraham’s covenant, let alone how my life might be affected by my partaking in its responsibilities and promises. Do I even believe in things like this—that God could make a promise to one person that can create real effects in lives four millennia later? I’m pretty positive that whatever blessings my fellow class members are recounting, these are mostly *their* readings of various positive things having come into their lives partly as a result of their spiritual lineage.

Just as I generally sit in the back of the Sunday School class, for most of my waking life the Mormon sacred narrative has taken a back chair to critical thought, ethics, and a science-driven overarching vision of what the world is really like or the criteria I should use to decide what is and is not really important. I definitely like many aspects of the Mormon mythos, and I even champion some of its most compelling ideas. But I often keep myself aloof from fellow ward members. I’ve learned to step outside the gospel’s story and see it as myth, as sacred narrative, as true in only certain ways—and *they* haven’t. I’m inside the Mormon tent, yes, committed to it even; but still every story told at church gets filtered through my academy-honed lenses: “Yeah, that’s a nice idea, but come on! You *have* to know that this, that, and that are full-on mythic!” Through these lenses, I hardly ever see the heart of the person telling the story.

At this moment, however, it all shifts. During my time-out-of-time, I stop deconstructing and am flooded with love for the good, humble, remarkable people in my class who are sharing their hearts, their determinations, their dreams for their lives and those of their children. I feel the call of Abraham—and I want *in*.

FOUR years later, I still occasionally deconstruct; I still notice gaps between myth and fact. I speak up when I think an idea has the potential to send a hurtful message. But I no longer feel distant from my fellow Saints. I *am in*.

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